

10.3 The Aztecs before Spanish arrival

10.3.1 Everyday life in Tenochtitlan

For more than three hundred years prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, the region that is now central and southern Mexico was dominated by the Aztecs. The structure of Aztec civilisation and culture was complex and highly organised with sophisticated architecture and well-developed agriculture.

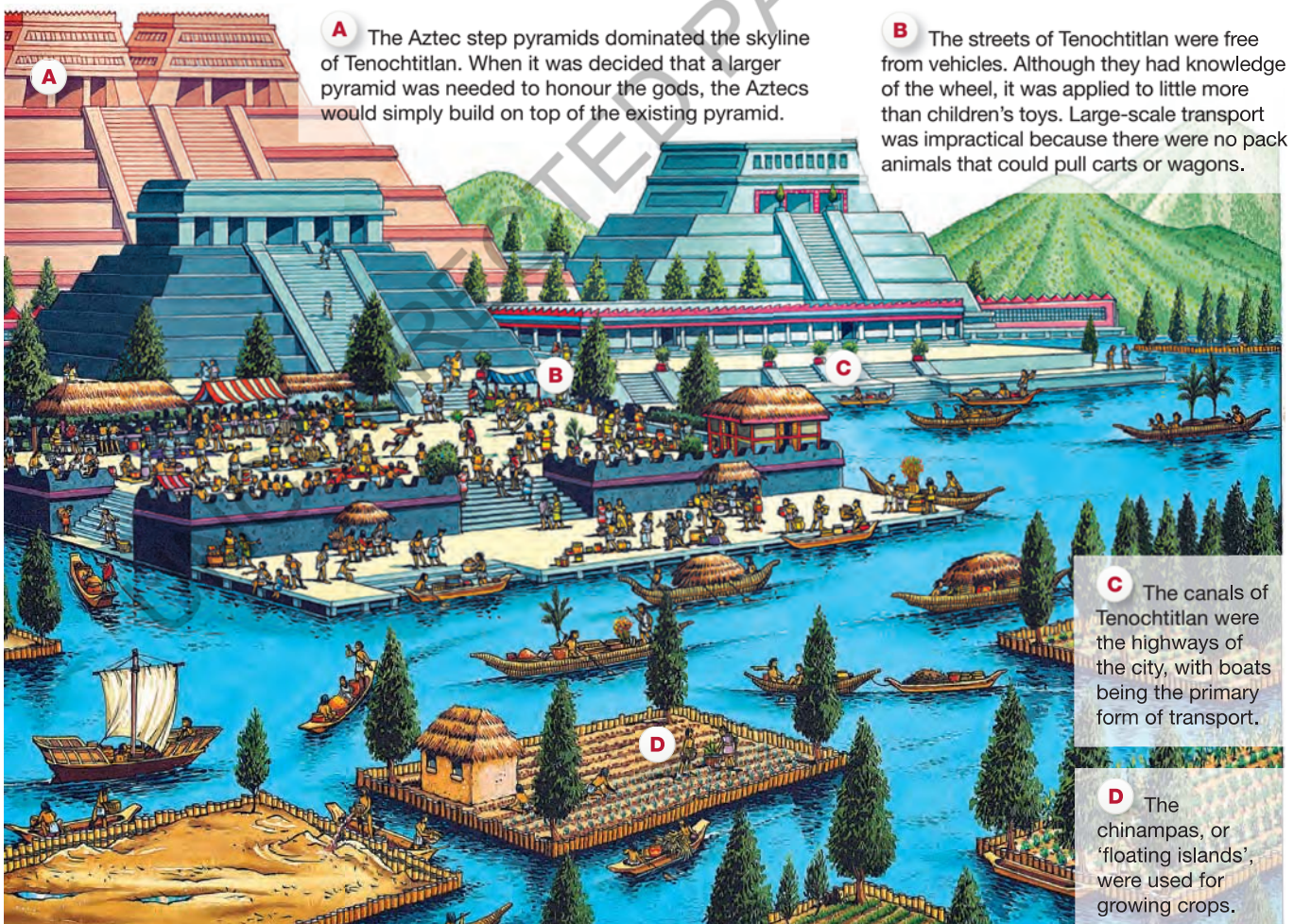
The Aztec people arrived in what is now Mexico in the late 1100s. By 1250, they had settled near the shores of Lake Texcoco, and by 1325 they had begun building the magnificent city of Tenochtitlan.

The city of Tenochtitlan, one of the best planned and most elaborate cities anywhere in the world at the time, was built in the middle of Lake Texcoco on five swampy islands. Three long causeways connected the city to land around the lake's edge. The city itself had a network of both canals and roads so that all sections could be accessed either on foot or by canoe.

School

The Aztecs were a highly organised society. They led rewarding lives, particularly the noble classes. Young boys went to school to learn to live prudently, govern, and understand history

SOURCE 1 A modern artist's impression of the city of Tenochtitlan



A The Aztec step pyramids dominated the skyline of Tenochtitlan. When it was decided that a larger pyramid was needed to honour the gods, the Aztecs would simply build on top of the existing pyramid.

B The streets of Tenochtitlan were free from vehicles. Although they had knowledge of the wheel, it was applied to little more than children's toys. Large-scale transport was impractical because there were no pack animals that could pull carts or wagons.

C The canals of Tenochtitlan were the highways of the city, with boats being the primary form of transport.

D The chinampas, or 'floating islands', were used for growing crops.

and the ways of the elders. Girls were mainly taught at home. At 15 years old, boys could attend one of two types of school: children of the nobility went to the calmecac, which had a focus on advanced learning, administrative skills and religion, or commoners went to the telpochcalli, which was basically a military school. However, all boys learned some fighting skills, regardless of the direction their working life took.

Food

There were generally two main meals a day, with one meal being eaten during the hottest part of the day. A staple of Aztec diet was maize but this was supplemented with a large variety of meat and vegetables. The Aztecs are famous for introducing the world to chocolate; however, this was reserved for warriors and nobility, and was mixed with ground maize to make a drink. Alcohol came in the form of a drink called octli. The sap from the maguey plant was fermented but, like chocolate, this was a drink strictly for nobles, royalty and warriors, with commoners being permitted to drink it only on special occasions.

Crime and punishment

By today's standards, Aztecs had incredibly harsh punishments for most crimes. For example, if a commoner was found wearing cotton clothes, the punishment was death. Likewise, a death sentence was possible if someone was found guilty of adultery or even cutting down a living tree. The accused would be sentenced by a group of judges in a way that is not so different from Australia's justice system today. Although the punishments seem harsh from our modern-day perspective, it is important to remember that Europeans from that period would not have been as shocked because punishments were equally harsh in Europe at that time.

10.3.1 Activities

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

- 1 In your own words, describe the city of Tenochtitlan.
- 2 What were some key differences between the diet of the nobility and that of the commoners?
- 3 Why might the Aztecs' common use of the death penalty not have shocked the Spanish?

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10.3.2 Aztec warfare

Life in the Aztec Empire was not peaceful; in fact, the Aztecs were in a state of perpetual war with the Tlaxcala people who also lived in the region that is now Mexico. The Aztec army was broadly organised into two layers. One was made up of commoners who were trained in basic fighting skills. The other consisted of the professional warrior class. Among the bravest and most skilled of these were the eagle and jaguar warriors, so named because of the distinguishing and fearful uniforms they wore. In the average battle, there were fewer casualties than compared with European battles because prisoners were highly valued as slaves or victims for human sacrifice. Most soldiers would try to disable rather than kill their opponent. This technique was used by the Tlaxcalans and other enemies, and it is likely that the Tlaxcalans used Aztec prisoners for human sacrifice just as the Aztecs did with Tlaxcalans.

SOURCE 2 An illustration from an Aztec codex showing jaguar warriors, who were the elite soldiers in the Aztec army. On the right, Spanish conquistadors are visible.



Deepen and check your understanding of the topic with the following resources and auto-marked questions:
Aztecs

10.3.2 Activities

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

- 1 a Do you think the Tlaxcalan people would have been likely or unlikely to help the Spanish conquer the Aztecs?
- b What do you think they would gain from helping the Spanish?

USING HISTORICAL SOURCES AS EVIDENCE

- 2 Explain why Aztec warriors sometimes dressed as certain animals, as shown in SOURCE 2. What effect do you think this would have had on their enemies in battle?

10.3.3 Mythology and religion

Religion played a very important role in the lives of the Aztecs. They were a polytheistic culture, meaning they worshipped more than one god. In fact, they worshipped many hundreds of gods. They had wide-ranging religious beliefs, including some that were similar to those of Europeans

SOURCE 3 Some of the most important Aztec gods



at the time. They believed the Earth was flat and the Sun fought darkness every night so it could rise each morning. The importance of religion to the Aztecs was expressed in their art and architecture, with enormous and elaborate temples built to worship the hundreds of gods that ruled over different aspects of nature and human activity.

Central to Aztec religion was the belief in human sacrifice to please the gods. As many as twenty thousand people a year were sacrificed to the gods at a temple built specifically for that purpose. Most of those sacrificed were slaves or prisoners captured in wars with surrounding cities. The ritual involved priests stretching the subject over an altar and then lighting a fire on the victim's heart. The priest then tore out the heart and placed it in a sacred dish before the bodies were rolled down the steps of the temple to lie in a heap. Many Aztecs believed that dying this way would ensure a quick passage to heaven. Like many other civilisations, the Aztecs believed in the afterlife. They believed that the key to reaching the afterlife quickly was in the way they died rather than the way they lived. Someone who died quietly of old age would have to pass through the underworld before reaching the realm of the dead. But a warrior who died in battle or a mother who died in childbirth would go straight to heaven.

SOURCE 4 A gold pendant representing Mictlantecuhtli



10.3.3 Activities

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1 Outline the key aspects of Aztec religion.

USING HISTORICAL SOURCES AS EVIDENCE

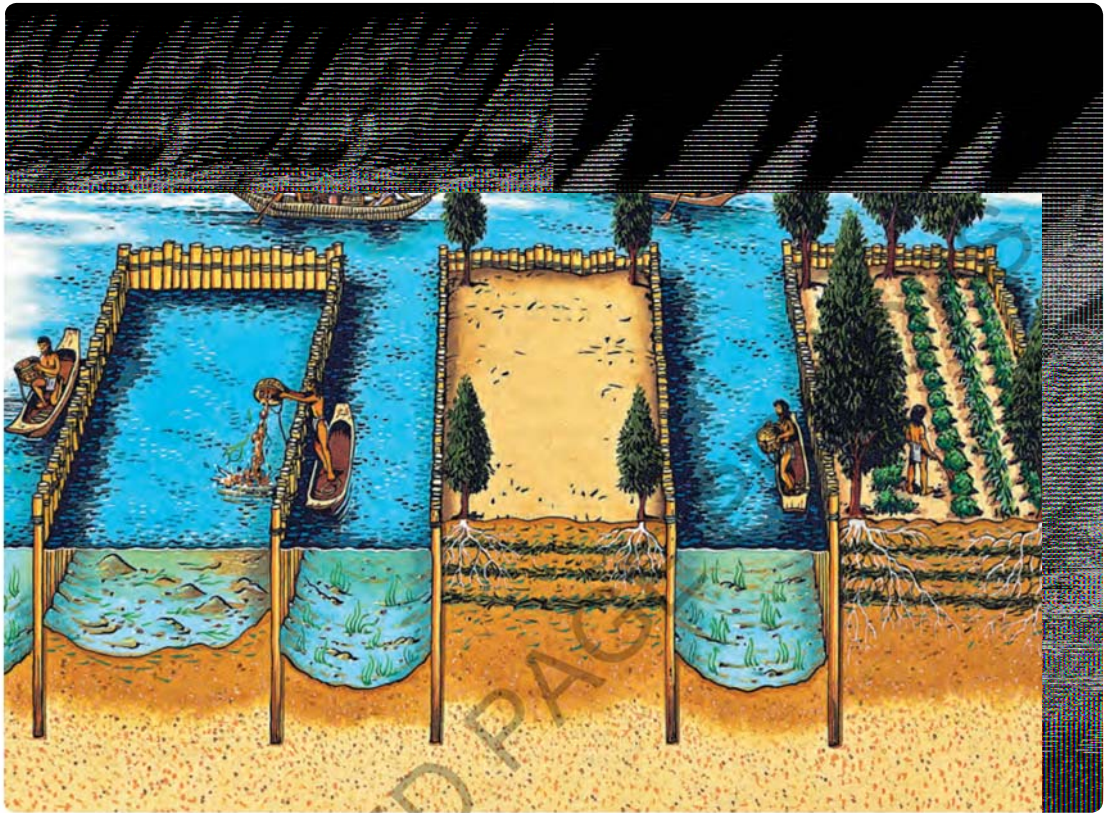
2 How does **SOURCE 4** support the argument that religion was important to the Aztecs?

3 Analyse **SOURCE 3**. Identify features of the illustrations that could help you identify the different gods if there were no labels.

10.3.4 Agriculture

Built in the middle of a lake, Tenochtitlan did not have easy access to any farmland, so the Aztecs had to use a special method to grow crops. This method involved using chinampas or 'floating gardens', although this second name is misleading. Chinampas were small man-made islands used for crops. An area of shallow lake bed was fenced off and gradually filled with mud, sediment and decaying vegetation until it rose above the water level. This provided a very fertile bed in which to plant a range of crops. This technique is still occasionally used today in some areas of Mexico.

SOURCE 5 An illustration showing the cross-section of chinampas. Each is at a different stage of development.



SOURCE 6 A modern-day chinampa in use in Mexico



10.3.4 Activities

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

- 1 How accurate is the term 'floating island' when describing a chinampa? Why?
- 2 Explain why chinampas are still used in parts of Mexico today.

10.3 PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

USING HISTORICAL SOURCES AS EVIDENCE

- 1 Using **SOURCE 3** as a reference, look back to 10.2 Examining the evidence and examine **SOURCE 4**. Can you identify which god is represented in the image? Justify your decision.
- 2 Compare and contrast **SOURCES 4** and **5** with reference to the image they portray of Aztec culture. If you referred to only one image, how accurate and reliable do you think your impression of the Aztecs would be?
- 3 Using your responses to question 2, explain the importance for students of history to refer to a number of different sources.